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Vernon Walters

Debunking the image of mysterious lone wolf

By Deborah Papier
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The lone wolf. Furtive, mysterious. A creature of the shadows, moving stealthily through those nether regions of the diplomatic world where the light of publicity never shines.

This was the reputation Vernon Walters developed — some would say cultivated — in four decades of service to the United States as a military intelligence officer, deputy director of the CIA and special State Department envoy.

But Vernon [Dick] Walters, who two weeks ago became Jeane Kirkpatrick's replacement as ambassador to the United Nations, doesn't have much patience these days with that cloak-and-dagger image.

"It's bunk," he says. "The lone wolf creeping around; that's an overdone legend. I've been highly visible for a long time. I could show you a box as large as this coffee table filled with cassettes of public speeches I have made in various parts of the United States."

"I have not been publicity-seeking," he continues. "I don't seek the limelight, because I find I can work more effectively if I don't. But I don't shun it either. This idea of my fleeing and hiding ... as I said at the press conference the day I was nominated, I have never traveled under a false name; I have never used a passport that was not made out in my name; and unlike many of the people in this room I could say that I'd never registered in a hotel under any name but my own."

The point that Mr. Walters wishes to make is that he is not some mole suddenly forced, at the age of 68, to adjust to a life above ground. He does not see his new post as representing a radical change in direction for him, but rather as a natural culmination of a long career in foreign affairs that involved him in most of the important events of our time, from the implementation of the Marshall Plan in Europe after World War II and the founding of the Organization of American States, to the Paris peace talks with the North Vietnamese and the normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China.

"The reason why I do not feel awestruck by this job," says Mr. Walters, "is that everything I've been doing for many years has been in direct preparation for it. For 44 years I've been serving the United States all over the world. I've translated for six presidents. I would venture to say I've probably been involved in world affairs longer than any of my predecessors in this job."

"I think Walters comes to the job running full-speed," says former Secretary of State Alexander Haig, for whom Mr. Walters worked as a special envoy. "He'll have no learning process. He's fully abreast of all the international issues, has been involved in the evolution of those issues. He will garner a level of respect that may be unprecedented in the history of that post. I would anticipate he will be the most effective U.N. ambassador we've had in recent years."

Former President Richard Nixon goes even further, saying that Mr. Walters is a "world-class strategic

thinker," and that this skill, combined with his linguistic talents (he speaks eight languages), makes him "the best-qualified American ambassador to the United Nations since the organization was founded."

Despite Mr. Walters' qualifications for the post, the course from his nomination to his confirmation was not a smooth one. He was nominated by President Reagan in early February. Six weeks later, it was reported that he was prepared to turn down the assignment unless he could be guaranteed the same access to National Security Council meetings that Jeane Kirkpatrick had, access that Secretary of State George Shultz evidently wished to deny him.

"It was not a matter of personal pique," says Mr. Walters. "I felt that if the position were diminished my voice would be muted, and it was not in the interest of the United States to have a U.N. delegate with a muted voice. I also thought that coming on the withdrawal from UNESCO, it could be interpreted as the United States' giving up on the United Nations, turning its back on it."

It is still not clear exactly how much access to the National Security Council Mr. Walters will have, but he professes himself content with the disposition of that particular issue.

"I've been told that the terms of reference of my job are exactly the same as [those of] my predecessor, which is perfectly satisfactory to me. A great many newspapers indicated that I had accepted a downgraded job, a lessened job, and that's just not true."

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